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SUBJECT: "TRNC" UNIVERSITIES: A (STUNTED) GROWTH INDUSTRY

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Turkish Cypriot higher education system has developed into an important source of income for the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" and pride for the community. Recent developments, however, call into question the viability of the education sector. Expanded capacity in Turkey's university system has eaten into the number of mainlanders wishing to study here, while more stringent standards in the GOT-administered university entrance exam have cut back the number of qualified "overflow" students on whom the north's college system relies. Meanwhile, the advent of the EU's Erasmus Program, and other similar programs in which "unrecognized" Turkish Cypriot universities cannot participate, has lessened the appeal of the north's schools for paying customers from elsewhere. Although Turkish Cypriots are inclined to blame all their woes (educational and otherwise) on this kind of "isolation," the comparably poor quality of the north's university system has also played a part. The "TRNC" will need to address these shortcomings, as well as find ways to cope with its universities' ambiguous institutional arrangements, if the Turkish Cypriot higher education system is to reach its full potential as an engine of sustainable economic growth. END SUMMARY.

"TRNC" 101

12. (SBU) Thanks in part to an Atatürkian belief in the merits of learning -- as well as a desire to keep up with the more prosperous and traditionally better-educated Greek Cypriots -- the "TRNC's" higher education system has developed into a highly-regarded part of Turkish Cypriot culture. It also plays an important role in the economy. Six post-secondary institutions exist in the north, all of which are four-year, western-style institutions catering to students from the "TRNC," Turkey, and third countries as well. Although mainland Turks account for a majority of the north's university students, the schools also attract significant numbers of students from the Middle East -- Iran, in particular. In 2005, 31,080 students attended universities in the north: 20,436 Turkish nationals, 8,059 Turkish Cypriots and 2,585 third-country nationals.

13. (SBU) "TRNC" universities have long made most of their money catching "overspill" from Turkey. In many cases, these were students who did not perform well enough on the Turkish entrance exam to qualify for admission into a mainland university. Although the north's universities have made an

effort to improve the quality of their product and recruit from other countries, the institutional ties that bind Turkish Cypriot universities to mainland Turkey (Turkish Cypriot schools are subject to the Turkish state accreditation and admissions program YOK) have so far meant that Turkish citizens make up the majority of the student body.

14. (SBU) The primary language of instruction at all universities in the north is English, and full-time one-year preparatory classes are generally available to ready students for English-language instruction. Turkish Cypriot university recruiters use English-language instruction as a selling point to attract students who wish to work in the international arena -- and as a means to "sift" through prospective applicants. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Turkish remains the lingua franca for most students, since many graduates from the north's universities (including several who have applied for jobs at the Embassy) clearly have difficulty speaking and writing in English.

The University Lineup

15. (SBU) The "TRNC" university system comprises five institutions as well as one Turkish university. A quick glance at the north's post-secondary schools illustrates how they vary considerably in size and quality:

-- Eastern Mediterranean University. Based in Famagusta, EMU is the largest and most reputable institution in northern Cyprus; as of 2005, EMU had 14,063 enrolled students. EMU is home to 10 academic departments offering 59 courses of study (from bachelor's degrees to PhDs) in varied disciplines such as Engineering, Communications Studies and English Literature. EMU is the only "state" school in the north, and therefore has the mixed blessing of more state funding

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accompanied by more rigid labor rules. The current U.S.-educated rector has drawn significant fire from EMU's unionized workers for his (as yet only moderately successful) efforts to introduce more rigid quality control over faculty, such as introducing an unpopular requirement that they participate in more research and publication to "stay sharp" in their respective fields. EMU is accredited by several European organizations, and the Engineering program is accredited by the American Board for Engineering and Technology, ABET.

-- Near East University. The largest private "TRNC" university based in northern Nicosia, Near East University had a total 8,808 students in 2005. NEU prides itself on its "international" identity, and points out that students come to the school from 18 different countries. NEU has seven faculties with 20 departments, and notably offers a Tourism and Hospitality Management degree. NEU is also the only university in the north with its own boat, which is used for Maritime Studies courses as well as Tourism training. NEU is accredited only in Turkey, by YOK.

-- European University of Lefke. This non-profit university was founded in 1990 by the Cyprus Science Foundation, an organization dedicated to providing higher education. In 2005, 2,309 students attended EUL. Although the university's stated objective at the time of its founding was to attract a student body with 50 percent of stQts hailing from third countries (i.e., not Turkish or Turkish Cypriot), in 2005, 81 percent of enrolled students at EUL were nonetheless from Turkey. EUL offers 21 undergraduate courses of study and nine graduate degrees. EUL holds YOK accreditation. Additionally, EUL recently established a study-abroad program with Coventry University in the United Kingdom, which allows EUL students to study two years in Cyprus and two in England.

-- Cyprus International University. Established in 1996 in a

suburb of Nicosia, CIU offers a limited menu of collegiate majors, including business administration and graphic design.

In 2005, 2,480 students were enrolled at CIU. CIU offers 18 YOK accredited undergraduate degree programs, along with three graduate programs. In addition to the YOK accreditation, CIU programs are also accredited by the Federation of Universities of the Islamic World (FUIW).

-- Girne American University. Girne American University, whose website features a bold representation of the American Flag and a logo furtively similar to the seal of the State Department, provides access to an "American-based higher education," and, by enrollment, is moderately successful in doing so: GAU has the third-largest student body in the "TRNC" with 3,420 enrolled students in 2005. GAU was founded in 1985 as an independent, non-profit institution, and grants undergraduate degrees in 21 disciplines and graduate degrees in Business and Economics. GAU's business degrees hold a narrow accreditation in the U.S., and all degrees are YOK-accredited.

-- Middle East Technical University ("TRNC" Campus). Already an established university on the Turkish mainland, METU opened a northern Cyprus campus in 2003, and became fully operational as of 2005. The school is located near Morphou and was built in an attempt to spur economic growth in the surrounding area; so far, this renewal has been only moderately successful. Eight programs of study are available, mainly in the fields of Engineering and Economic and Administrative Science; all programs are four years, culminating with the receipt a bachelor's degree, which, according to METU, is comparable to a degree from the Turkish mainland campus. While newly established with only a limited number of students attending the university, METU officials forecast that 6,000 students will be enrolled by 2015. Entry standards for METU North Cyprus are higher than those of other universities in the "TRNC."

An Economic Engine

16. (U) These six schools have developed into an important source of income for the Turkish Cypriot economy. Turkish Cypriot officials estimate that revenue from university education is equivalent to one million tourists annually in terms of economic impact; officials also estimate that each university student contributes the equivalent of over 10,000 USD each year to the north's economy. Thus, the

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higher-education sector has been designated a priority by Turkish Cypriot officials. In 2004, eight percent of the "TRNC" GDP could be attributed to spending on public education institutions, a much higher figure than most EU countries. Along with Turkey, the "TRNC" continues to finance new investment projects in the market for education.

Concern for the Future

17. (SBU) Indications suggest that there are problems on the gravy train, however. University sources confirm a 58 percent drop in enrollment of Turkish nationals in 2006. This statistic has distressed officials in the north; returning from a recent trip to Pakistan, "TRNC President" Mehmet Ali Talat issued a dramatic appeal for the "Turkish world" to send more students to northern Cyprus.

18. (SBU) There are several theories behind the recent drop-off in enrollments. We understand that five new private universities have recently opened in Turkey, and are reportedly corraling students who otherwise may have studied in northern Cyprus. Similarly, more stringent standards in the YOK-administered Turkish university exam have reportedly cut back the number of qualified Turkish "overflow" students on whom the north's system has traditionally relied. Our

contacts in Turkish Cypriot universities claim that YOK has reworked the IQ-test-like exam to include achievement-based material. Traditionally, students who aspire to enter universities spend the majority of their final year of secondary school in test-preparation centers instead of attending classes. Accordingly, these students had a difficult time passing the achievement part of the new exam, having little substantive instruction in the last year of high school. Out of approximately 1.7 million Turkish test-takers, 268,000 students normally passed the math portion of the old test; however, this year, only 150,000 passed, leaving a deficit of 118,000 Turkish students. Given that the students' first choice will always be a free state school or scholarship to a private university, the private universities will suffer. As far as Turkish students are concerned, all universities in north Cyprus are private, with additional expenses for transportation plus a high cost of living. Many Turkish Cypriots say these factors account for the shortfall in students coming to the north this year -- a gap Turkish Cypriots hope will close once students in Turkey are able to catch up with the new exam material.

¶9. (SBU) Other factors are also at play. Although Turkish Cypriots are quick to blame all their problems on "isolation," there is some truth to the claim that being somewhat cut off from the outside world -- thanks in part to Greek Cypriot policies -- has prevented the north's universities from developing a more attractive product capable of luring in better students. Turkish Cypriot universities, for example, cannot participate in the EU's Erasmus program, which encourages transnational cooperation between universities, supports exchange programs, and provides for the mutual recognition and portability of degrees. Turkish Cypriot universities, which are not "recognized" by the Republic of Cyprus, are excluded from joining Erasmus and similar programs thanks to an intensive RoC lobbying effort within the EU (where it wields a veto in many fora) and outside it as well. Greek Cypriots often mobilize their overseas diaspora to prevent U.S. and other western universities from entering into institutional relationships with Turkish Cypriot universities, most of which are built on Greek Cypriot owned land in the north. With no guarantee that their degrees will be accepted outside Turkey and the "TRNC," qualified students from Turkey, the Turkish Cypriot community and third countries have a strong incentive to take their business elsewhere.

¶10. (SBU) Finally, Turkish Cypriot universities must contend with questions about the quality of education they provide. With the possible exception of EMU (which has earned accreditation from ABET and other prominent organizations) and METU (which enjoys reflected glow from its prestigious mainland mother ship), Turkish Cypriot universities suffer from a fly-by-night reputation. This may be slightly unfair, but it is nonetheless true that, by objective measures such as accreditation and publications by faculty, Turkish Cypriot universities hardly compare to schools in Turkey or the EU, which are their main competitors.

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COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Whether the result of Greek Cypriot pressure, institutional isolation, changes in the Turkish system, or the comparatively poor quality of their product, Turkish Cypriot universities must contend with several severe handicaps. Nevertheless, the "TRNC" will almost certainly continue to invest in its higher learning infrastructure because the education sector has developed into such an important part of the economy. The current drop-off in enrollment may only be a temporary blip which could force some universities to close departments, cut back spending or find other ways to deal with the decreased demand in the short run. In the long run, however, the north's

universities must address the dual challenge of improving their product while finding a way to survive with an ambiguous legal and accreditation status.

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